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SUBJECT: PM RASMUSSEN HOLDS EDGE AHEAD OF DANISH ELECTION

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Classified By: Ambassador James P. Cain, reasons 1.4b,d

11. (C) Summary: With opinion polls showing remarkably little change after more than two weeks of campaigning, Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen maintains a slight edge over his center-left opposition rivals ahead of November 13 parliamentary elections. Rasmussen's Liberal-Conservative-Danish People's Party alliance is still projected to be a few seats shy of a majority, however, and may require the support of the centrist New Alliance party -- support that could prove costly and contentious for other coalition partners. With about a fifth of voters still undecided, the distance between the two camps is close enough that we cannot exclude entirely the possibility of a Social Democratic-led victory, despite the opposition's failure to generate any momentum in the race so far. End summary.

12. (SBU) The latest surveys indicate that the situation four days before voting is more or less what it was at the start of the campaign: a rough parity in support between the two camps, with a small advantage to the PM and with New Alliance determining the balance of power. Some polls point to modest movement in the pro-government grouping (the latest Gallup poll projects 87 seats for the current government parties, just three short of a majority, with New Alliance), while others show the Social Democrats and their allies benefiting from New Alliance's recent decline (one survey has the opposition group holding an 85-82 seat edge, the first such result of the campaign). The two head-to-head debates between PM Rasmussen and opposition leader Helle Thorning-Schmidt (SDP) failed to stir any significant movement for either camp, raising the stakes for multi-party televised debates scheduled for the two evenings before election day.

13. (C) The main issue of the campaign remains the familiar debate on public services spending and tax policy (with the left calling for more spending and the pro-government parties defending their policies as fiscal good sense), but immigration has also emerged as a hot topic in the last days of the campaign. Last week, the Social Democrats joined the Social Liberal Party in calling for major changes to Denmark's asylum policy, which would allow asylum seekers to live and work outside the centers to which they are now restricted. The move has sparked lively debate in a country that had greatly tightened its immigration policies in the past decade, while witnessing a flood of asylum seekers pass through the country into neighboring Sweden. On a tactical level, the opposition's new position was widely viewed as an attempt to lure New Alliance, which nevertheless dismissed the gesture out of hand. PM Rasmussen has taken a mild tone in response, pledging to work toward a consensus position on

asylum after the elections, but his allies in the nationalist Danish People's Party are certain to press the issue hard in these last four days.

¶4. (C) Meanwhile, New Alliance leader Naser Khader continues to reinforce his image as an erratic and unpredictable partner. Khader revises demands for his support every few days, and he has reversed himself twice about whether he would force PM Rasmussen into a constitutional process of formal negotiations (a "Queen's round") before agreeing to support the government. Some of his demands, such as increased foreign aid and assistance for immigrants and schoolchildren, might be possible in part, but others, such as dramatically liberalizing asylum policy and investigations into Afghanistan and Iraq deployments, are clear non-starters for the government and especially for the Danish People's Party. The Prime Minister's hope is that the New Alliance's support will continue its recent slide (now down to around five percent) and that a final hard push will be enough for his current coalition to continue in power without NA's backing.

¶5. (C) Should neither the prime minister's coalition nor the opposition achieve a parliamentary majority November 13, the next steps in the electoral process would be largely determined by Naser Khader. New Alliance could offer immediate formal support to PM Rasmussen, allowing the government to continue as is, or could withhold that support and force the prime minister into a "Queen's round" of talks, which could take a week or perhaps much longer.

¶6. (C) Khader's latest position is that he will support the government even if agreement can't be reached on a common platform. Rasmussen has signaled, however, that he doesn't

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want to be the head of such an unstable, case-by-case coalition, or one that would result in a return to Denmark's "footnote period," when policy -- especially foreign and security policy -- was constantly undermined by opposition pressure. Many party officials here are already discussing openly the prospect of new elections within a year if the next government needs to rely on New Alliance.

¶7. (C) Comment: This election remains Rasmussen's to lose, but the prime minister could be forgiven for wondering what he's won if it means counting on Naser Khader. At the same time, one of the characteristic features of Danish politics has been the ability to compromise and forge consensus when needed, and this may be one of those times.

CAIN